

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CLEANING WORLD: WITH TOMORROW IN MIND

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Abstract: *Starting from the idea of „sustainability culture”² by Stephen Ashkin, the Father of Green Cleaning³, in which the actions and choices we make are defining for improving health and the environment, I conducted a study that explores the behind-the-scenes stories of a company in the cleaning industry. In this movement, the major battles are fought by the staff in middle and top management, but the weapons are in the hands of the cleaning agents. It is a process that involves numerous efforts and requires significant resources to minimize costs, streamline activities, and reduce waste. All of this is because, in the battle against filth, „the choices we make -- from our daily actions and words to the things we buy and ultimately throw away -- really do matter”⁴(Stephen Ashkin)*

Key words: *sustainability, green cleaning, adaptability, cleanness, waste & recycling*

1. Introduction

Building a sustainable future is the current concern, and it is not without reason! Some say that the existence of a circular economy can be the solution for a safer, more efficient, and greener future. The existence of campaigns or public policies, all translated into laws and regulations, brings long-term results. Others would say that nothing surpasses the rule of common sense, that this is the key. Ironically, neither is wrong! Regardless of the perspective you have, they all come down to the safest path that makes us think of a tomorrow at least as good as today. Oliver Burkeman (2022, 11) said, “the average lifespan of a person is absurd, horrifying, insultingly short,” I would just say that tomorrow is not that far away... for that, it would be good to care.

A topic we cannot overlook, a duty we have towards the world, the country, and the society we live in. At the same time, it is the main driving force that characterizes social relationships, it can be seen as a fundamental component because “A sustainable

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society is a society that knows how to be responsible”⁵. Responsibility, or whose responsibility it is for a healthy environment, can be viewed depending on the socio-cultural framework, it can take different forms and meanings. I will start from the classical definition, formulated more than three decades ago by Brundtland G. H. (1987), seen as the cornerstone “Sustainable development meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Pleşu, 2023). Thus, a sustainable way of life does not necessarily mean giving up consumption, but changing our behavior to a responsible one.

We see people talking about sustainability and its importance without having any idea of what it means, but we also see people taking action without even realizing it. Sustainability sounds good and is trendy; colloquially, it is considered a good thing to care about. However, sustainability means more than just the individual elements that compose it; it means the synergy between these elements and working as a team. When we think about the three main pillars of sustainability: environmental protection, social development, and economic development, we must see them as interdependent in order to achieve the desired results. In Romanian culture, sustainable businesses are still in their early stages, but in the past decade, they seem to have transitioned from being a “nice to have” to a “must-have”. Maybe there is not as much concern as we would like, but that does not mean there is no concern at all; it is a practice that is increasingly widespread in the private business environment in Romania⁶. Carbon emissions reduction is on the agenda of large companies. But what about us, ordinary people? How do we contribute to a secure future as employees?

From all the aforementioned, one thing stands out: Sustainability should be our main concern, for all of us. It can be said that sustainability is a way of life. I mentioned earlier that some of us take action only to brag (maybe) without knowing what we are doing, while others take action without knowing the reason behind it. I will focus on the latter. Even though sustainability has multiple components that go hand in hand, I will focus on some of those who contribute to the end result: the people who work in the field of cleanliness and waste management.

2. Theoretical Support

Douglas (1966) described dirt as an issue that “does not find its place,” arguing that dirt appears when we have an image of how the world should be organized (cited in Drazin, 2009, 67). Regarding dirt, from the perspective of industrialized cleanliness, there are clear procedures to ensure the quality standards of the final product. Depending on the field of activity, the standards change. Thus, dirt becomes an indicator of cultural structuring (Drazin, 2009, 67). Just as in the case of status, culture also plays a primordial role in defining the standard of cleanliness. It seems quite simple – “it's

⁵https://jurnaldesustenabilitate.ro/?gclid=CjwKCAiA_aGuBhACEiwAly57MS_bq3tcF9ogZ7gyL3DtXEDtatf_JQ_hQ_USNdEaHC3AXdE3doiZPHBoC-SAQAvD_BwE. Accessed on February 10, 2024

⁶https://jurnaldesustenabilitate.ro/?_gclid=CjwKCAiA_aGuBhACEiwAly57MS_bq3tcF9ogZ7gyL3DtXEDtatf_JQhQ_USNdEaHC3AXdE3doiZPHBoC-SAQAvD_BwE. Accessed on February 10, 2024

clean!" or "it's not clean!" But who defines "clean"? How and when do we know that "it's enough!" or "you haven't done your job!?" How do we know that our result is not short-term?

Anthropological studies that have analyzed these processes of cultural ordering and obtaining cleanliness in different ways have observed that not only do we order objects, but objects also order us. Some studies have focused more on "dust" than on "dirt" (in Drazin, 2009, 69). Therefore, a relevant perspective is not only how we get rid of the garbage that no one wants, but also what we do with it, how all these produce a difference. By analogy, waste management can be seen as what orders and reorganizes life in general. Looking at cleanliness from a historical and social perspective, we understand its importance for the field of sociology. Cleanliness through waste management, viewed from a sociological perspective, is expressed as a basic concept that encompasses ideologies. Moreover, it relates to the social process of cleanliness and the practices around this process. The distinction between cleaning and producing social cleanliness.

Miller (1994 cited in Drazin, 2009, 69) suggests the dichotomy - people who order things (for example, cleanliness) and at the same time things that order people (for example, dust, dirt, garbage) - is seen as problematic in many cultural contexts. Starting from the idea that everything around us can be organized in dynamic relationships (ANT theory), cleanliness is a social phenomenon that describes how society is organized and no so much an explanation of its activity.

In other words, not only people in the house, but also objects have agency (Layton, 2003). People order objects, but objects, in turn, can order people, for example, directing their work (Drazin, 2009, 84). Thus, even waste has agency and directs not only the entire activity but also the entire system and society in which we live.

On the other hand, we are discussing the other components of cleanliness - detergents, equipment, and utensils. There are studies in the field of cleanliness (Troynikov et al., 2016) that explain their impact on the environment. Cleaning products with traditional substances are quickly being replaced by those with ecological ingredients (Simcox et al., 2013). These products, conventionally referred to as "green", are preferred because they have a lesser impact on health and the environment. Therefore, they are considered sustainable. Whether ecological or not, the solution is not to stop using them, but to understand what happens when we finish the cleaning process. If we think of a simple example - cooking oil. Of course, it is not healthy, but do we all give it up? The solution is to collect it and send it for recycling. It is the same with cleaning. We have eco-friendly detergents with reduced environmental impact, we have technical solutions that do not use any detergents at all. However, what do we do when we need those that are less friendly to the environment, or what do we do when what we are cleaning becomes a danger to the environment (for example, the oils generated by a factory in the production process)? All of this helps us understand that the problem is much more complex, and the key seems to be organization, proceduralization, and control, not elimination.

3. Methodological Considerations

The article is based on 12 in-depth interviews with cleaning agents and 6 interviews with individuals from middle and top management. All combined with participatory observation, which provided me with the optimal framework for interpreting the discussions. The main theme of the discussion was how sustainability is defined within a company that provides professional cleaning services.

The information received during the discussions was correlated with the observation notes, thus constructing a framework that defines attitudes and behaviors regarding this phenomenon. The purpose of the work is to examine how opinions and attitudes are invested in the practical importance of workers in the cleaning industry. Essential, both for practical actions and for theoretical organization in the field, it is an area of activity that provides specific directions for what sustainability means.

4. Cleanness and Social Practices

As in many other fields of activity, in the cleaning industry, we have multiple components that tend to be organized, managed, and manipulated. It is a complex activity that involves economic, social, and relational processes, as well as technology, gender relations, power relations, and so on. This type of work is generally performed by people with low qualifications, whether we refer to domestic cleaning (housekeepers, homemakers) or institutionalized cleaning (which is done by specialized companies). In this article, I aim to address the issue of sustainability through the lens of work in the cleaning industry within specialized companies that provide cleaning services. When we talk about working with dirt and, implicitly, managing waste, it is mostly done by people with a low level of qualification. In the case of companies in this field, a distinction must be made between those that offer cleaning services and those that offer waste management. In any case, in both situations, the worker's profile is the same, and waste management is a common element, to some extent.

What is interesting in the case of these companies is the influence of new technologies and their impact on relationships and the environment. Following the saying "tell me who you hang out with, and I'll tell you who you are," we can look at how cleaning companies and waste management companies approach the issue of sustainability. Companies, state institutions, and even individuals often outsource these types of services, and one of the reasons they do so may be because it is a complex activity.

Cleaning at first glance seems like a simple, routine activity that does not require a high level of qualification. Each individual has their own representation of what it means. It is a practice that, whether we want it or not, is part of everyday life. Because it is a common process, there is a prejudice that cleaning is also simple. How hard can it be to clean? How hard can it be to take out the trash? As easy as it may seem, it is just as difficult!

"Waste" from the perspective of Romanian legislation is defined as „any substance or object that the holder discards or intends or is obliged to discard.” (Vulpe, 2021). "Waste" from a social perspective is the unwanted dirt that no one wants anymore

(Aron, 2023). From a sustainability perspective, “waste” has a clearly defined path of collection and reintroduction into the market with a new purpose. However, we look at it, waste management is the process that underlies the life cycle of any waste: collection, transportation, treatment, recycling, and ultimately valorization.

On the other hand, cleanliness implies not only managing the actual dirt but also dealing with the dirt generated by the cleaning process. What do we do with contaminated water after washing? How do we wash the cloths and mops we use? Essentially, how do we clean responsibly?

5. The Waste that Matters

Through interviews with subjects from the cleaning industry, you understand how these workers perceive their personal lives, how they perceive and what vision they have about their own work. Furthermore, you understand how they manage the waste that no one wants. Culture represents one of the main factors in building the negative label and, implicitly, the stigma. In Romania, from a social point of view, cleaning services are seen as dishonorable work, and the stigma surrounding this profession is among the strongest. However, they are also the ones who contribute productively to long-term sustainability outcomes. Labels on people in the cleaning industry manage to be imprinted in the identity of conduct. Nevertheless, they are the ones we rely on when discussing a safe environment.

In fact, through interviews with less visible subjects in the cleaning industry, you understand why waste is managed and how daily work is organized. We find a difference in reporting on the results of work. The importance of all these activities is observed in management discourse and less so from the worker himself.

Discussions with cleaning workers place you rather in a picture where what is seen is important. Wastes reach specialized companies in a chaotic form. For now, they are not thrown according to their destination and then they end up being sorted by workers. Thus, the worker bears the responsibility of managing all the wastes that are thrown away and all the garbage generated from his work. Often vocal and dissatisfied, they offer a dedication noted rather through submission to rules and the execution of the tasks outlined for them. The study of the worker's life in the cleaning industry through the lens of sustainability is only possible by following the “backstage” activity.

Management transports you to places that are, in reality, free from compromise or boredom. The cleaning activity is standardized and organized enough to make you believe that it is impossible to make a mistake. In reality, managers and cleaning team coordinators are witnesses to rules that are often not applied. However, not everyone is discouraged. At the end of a workday, they have “an incredible satisfaction” (T. from the middle management team) because it seems that „more than in any other field, when you see that you have achieved something and knowing how hard it is... you simply have a unique satisfaction” (D. from the middle management team). The dirt and garbage are made invisible by workers in the cleaning industry. How and where these go, is important to monitor from the perspective of sustainability, as it is treated here. Regardless of the resistance in the field, the coordinators of these services are receptive

to aspects related to waste traceability and the management of those that result from work. Their profile is defined by the way they continue to train and constantly verify conventional notions, valuing the importance of the result above material benefits. Their perseverance is what „makes the difference” (O. from the middle management team). Due to the satisfaction felt, attention is focused on treating the causes, not the directly observable effects. In their discourse, their favorite themes are efficiency and sustainability. In other words, they are preoccupied with how to clean more and better, with respect for nature. To “keep up with new trends” (P. from the top management team), they participate in fairs, conferences, and panels.

The main satisfaction is to leave „a satisfied client behind, who has received a service as agreed, on time, and performed safely” (A. from the top management team). Everything boils down to “opportunities and challenges... when we talk about sustainability” (D. from the top management team).

However, the work and the result depend on understanding the importance and the ultimate purpose. How is this relationship and the entire process built? “When we think about cleanliness, everything seems very simple. It's not quite like that. Yes, we clean something... but, let's think about it! Do we know what type of dirt it is? Do we know on what type of surface? It's all chemistry! And when everything is chemistry, then you need to know what you're doing with the detergent, the dirt, and the water that have mixed.” (D. from the top management team).

After speaking with management, you realize that the cleaning company embraces a sustainable direction. The emphasis of sustainability in their management discourse is evident in the measures they take and their desire to keep up with new trends.

6. Conclusions and Discussions

To clean involves more than the act itself; it involves the placement in society of a service that implies status, level of education, hygiene, and civilization. More precisely, the cleaning process can be viewed from all perspectives of surrounding life. By conducting a historical analysis of cleanliness, we can understand the process as being responsible for the evolution towards forms of civilization. By placing it on the temporal axis, we can understand how cleanliness norms have led to civilization and especially to the civilization of cleanliness.

Concerns related to environmental care through cleaning are, of course, just one (important) piece of sustainable development discussed by sustainability. However, the process itself of cleaning, or supporting the waste management process (by selectively disposing of waste), is the responsibility of each of us individually. We all contribute to collective responsibility.

Understanding such a phenomenon is important in studying the decision-making process, understanding the functioning of an organization, and understanding human behaviors. Existing research focuses on investigating economic and legislative tools and levers, and less on operational execution levers. Understanding such a phenomenon can help us understand that waste is not a problem; it is a resource and a source of raw material. The process of cleaning up dirt generates dirt in turn. We are not only talking

about work that maintains work, but also about creating a new need - the actual management of its result.

The cleaning activity is full of processes, procedures, and standardization. The disposition and traceability of waste help you keep the entire process under control. Managing a cleaning services company feels easier when things are going well, when environmental audits pass successfully, or when improvements in waste management are seen in numbers. Such results increase your chances in a market with unfair competition. It seems that participating in conferences or trade fairs keeps them up to date with new trends.

The main idea following discussions with cleaning agents is that what is visible is relevant, and waste and its traceability are not a direct concern for them. This issue is extremely pressing when we think about long-term effects. However, the most important thing is that the entire activity is coordinated by the middle and top management team that sets the direction. The management discourse can be placed in the perspective of the "father of green cleaning," Stephen Ashkin, in which every daily action ensures the existence of a tomorrow.

The starting point of this work was a correlation between Stephen Ashkin's perspective on the importance of the existence of a 'culture of sustainability' and the perspective of historical evolution as a process of civilization by Norbert Elias (2000), understood as a process of modernization and adaptation to new systems. Thus, Norbert Elias's "Civilizing Process" highlights the idea that the Western habitus has generated social and economic developments. More specifically, the way in which social existence has changed ultimately led to the formation of the modern state through the dissemination of large-scale processes, which have been assimilated into individual consciousness. Cleanliness is a subject that allows for the analysis of social roles and statuses, inequalities, and power relations. It explains the nature of societal evolution, with hygiene and waste management playing a central role in the systems that shape the world. Understood as a central characteristic of all societies, from all times, it is relevant to be analyzed from the perspective of both short-term and long-term outcomes.

After all, it seems that taking into account two essential characteristics: the fact that we live in an era of change and the resistance to change of cleaning workers, the role of the leader becomes extremely important. Promoting sustainable practices, adaptability, commitment to not compromise on quality, and perseverance - all these seem to be qualities that can create a bridge between management and execution. It seems that the secret is not perfection, which is anyway unattainable, but progress and perseverance. For such companies, ensuring a future means a complex journey full of challenges and with very high resistance to change from the workers.

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